

Communication Skills—Core of Employability Skills: Issues and Concerns

A. V. Bharathi

Tolani Commerce College, Adipur, Kachchh Dist (Gujarat), India

Abstract: This study focuses on the writing skills of third-year Bachelor of Commerce students of the colleges affiliated to Krantiguru Shyamji Krishna Verma Kachchh University, Bhuj, India. The objectives of this study were to (a) study the syllabus relevance of the concerned subject at the final-year graduation level in the commerce discipline, (b) identify gaps in the existing undergraduate-level syllabi, (c) assess the communicative abilities of students, (d) gather the opinion of the teachers on their students' writing performance, and (e) suggest some remedial measures to improve students' language proficiency. Data was collected via questionnaire and opinionnaire. The study found the syllabus does not provide any scope for the development of practical, soft presentation skills. The study confirms that the syllabus does not provide any scope for developing writing skills of the learners; rather, it demands and evaluates memory skills and reproductive abilities. There also seems to be a vast gap between expected and achieved levels of efficiency. This study points out the certain lacunae in the current educational communication, which emphasizes theoretical acquisition of knowledge and fails to provide successful guidance for the development and expansion of human capabilities, as well as personal development.

Keywords: communication skills, language skills, employability skills, communicative abilities, commerce students, syllabus relevance, language proficiency

Introduction

“Education can unlock all doors for a progress.” —Swami Vivekananda

“Communication is the mother of existence.” —Keerthi Kumar

In today's information and communication technology (ICT) ruled knowledge society, English is the global means of communication. English language proficiency has gained great significance in all the major fields including education, trade, commerce, and employment. Effective communication has become a benchmarking parameter for ensuring growth and success in any field. English language proficiency is imperative for creating and maintaining better relations at any level. English language, which is known as the *lingua franca*, is one of the most significant means of communication in today's world. Furthermore, as a result of the ongoing globalization, knowledge of English has become a necessity.

In India, English plays a key role in our educational system and national life. It is an international language that provides a window to the world. English is being taught as a language of instruction in schools and colleges and, as such, in this era of communication

technology, without English, no further higher education or interchange of professional language is possible.

English has the power to change the world. It provides information in every conceivable branch of knowledge. Even the student community has realized that English is necessary to expose one's identity to the world outside. Considering this, parents and learners have realized that through acquisition of English language knowledge and usage, one can withstand increasing levels of competition and can sustain one's career growth. Here, Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest works.

Language, a Skill

Language is essentially a skill. Knowing about these things is an intellectual exercise (cognition) and using or doing them is a skill (action). Basically, language skills are categorized into four segments—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—that can be further categorized into two subsegments—productive/active skills (i.e., speech and writing) and receptive/passive skills (i.e., listening and reading). Alternatively, they can be subdivided into proper and casual skills, based on their usage, as shown in Figure 1.

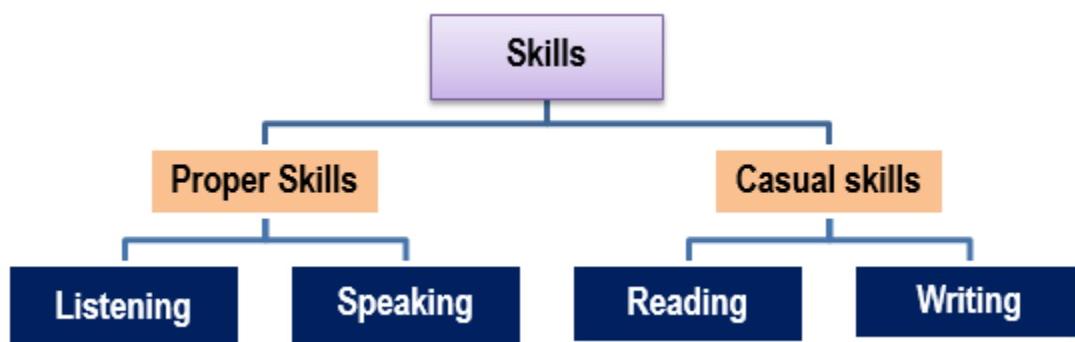


Figure 1. Division of the language subskills based on usage.

Proper skills (i.e., listening and speaking) are frequently used by all, whereas casual skills (i.e., reading and writing) are used casually. One can live without reading and writing, but not without speaking and listening. This indicates the importance of listening and speaking in the process of language learning (Paliwal, 1998). So, in order to enhance one's communicative abilities, one should have good acquaintance with all four language skills.

To attain the optimal level of language proficiency, a language teacher must consider four variables when programming any teaching: the learner, the setting, the material, and the teacher (see Figure 2). If all these are in proper tune, the outcome of the teaching–learning process will be fruitful and encouraging.

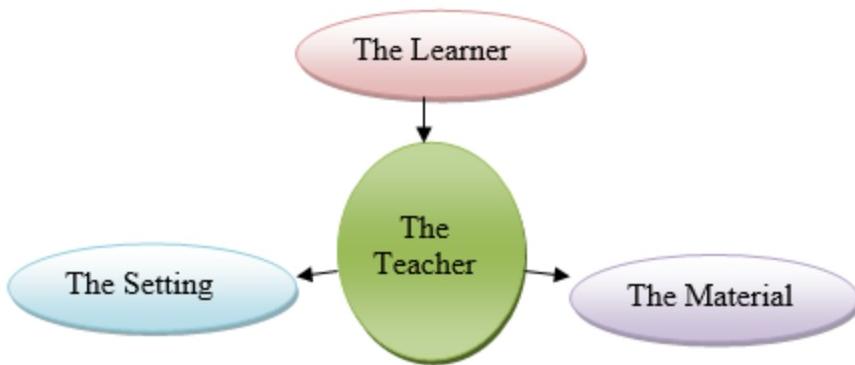


Figure 2. Variables influencing language learning outcomes.

The teacher must know the age, educational level, proficiency level, goals, and linguistic and cultural background and handicaps of his or her students when teaching a language. Instructional materials must be up to date and implemented to their full capability. The teacher must be proficient in that language, accounting for linguistic and cultural variances.

Current Scenario

Today's world demands such young a generation that possesses certain skills and virtues in addition to their academic excellence. Knowledge has become a way of survival and the growing economy needs highly skilled human powers to generate marketability. For this, we need an educational system that caters to the quality expectations and produces trained human power in all faculties and all subjects. Though there is a growing demand for English language proficiency, we still have Macaulay's curriculum, which emphasizes only memorization and reproduction. The whole teaching process lacks the focus on sharpening logical thinking, creativity, and flexibility. The skills of present-day graduates do not match with the expectations of the employers, and the present situation of English language teaching and learning is not at all encouraging in Gujarat, India. The failure of many children to learn to read and write even after 10 to 12 years of schooling is a cause for concern.

It has been observed that in the current process of English language teaching/learning, even many of the final-year Bachelor of Commerce students remain very passive and lack basic communication skills. Only a few exceptional students are found to be capable of writing and speaking proper English. They are incapable of reading a book with correct pronunciation and following it independently. Incorrect spellings and ungrammatical construction are found to be quite common, even among college students. Correct use of English idioms and figures of speech is rare. Considering the present scenario of teaching/learning English, the researcher, an English lecturer in one of the commerce colleges located in the state of Gujarat, saw a need to study the levels of language proficiency.

Purpose

This was a study of communication skills, focusing on the writing skills of third-year Bachelor of Commerce students of the colleges affiliated to Krantiguru Shyamji Krishna Verma Kachchh University, Bhuj, India.

Objectives

The objectives of this study were to (a) study the syllabus relevance of the concerned subject at the final-year graduation level in the commerce discipline, (b) identify gaps in the existing undergraduate-level syllabi, (c) assess the communicative abilities of students, (d) gather the opinion of the teachers on their students' writing performance, and (e) suggest some remedial measures to improve students' language proficiency.

Data was collected via questionnaire and opinionnaire. The researcher obtained the responses of both teachers and students from all the commerce colleges affiliated with the Krantiguru Shyamji Krishna Verma Kachchh University and collected the data regarding writing skill efficiency. The collected responses were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Sample and Population

All 18 third-year-level Bachelor of Commerce English or commercial communication teachers comprised the sample of teachers. Out of 1,881 total students, the researcher took 618 (33%) students for the student sample.

Major findings

The researcher found that 67% of the teacher respondents opined that the syllabus does not emphasize development of the listening skill. Additionally, 72% reported that the syllabus does not give any weight to the most-demanded speaking skill. More than half of the teachers (56%) said they believed that the syllabus emphasized the reading skill, and 72% of them stated that the syllabus emphasized the writing skill (see Figure 3).

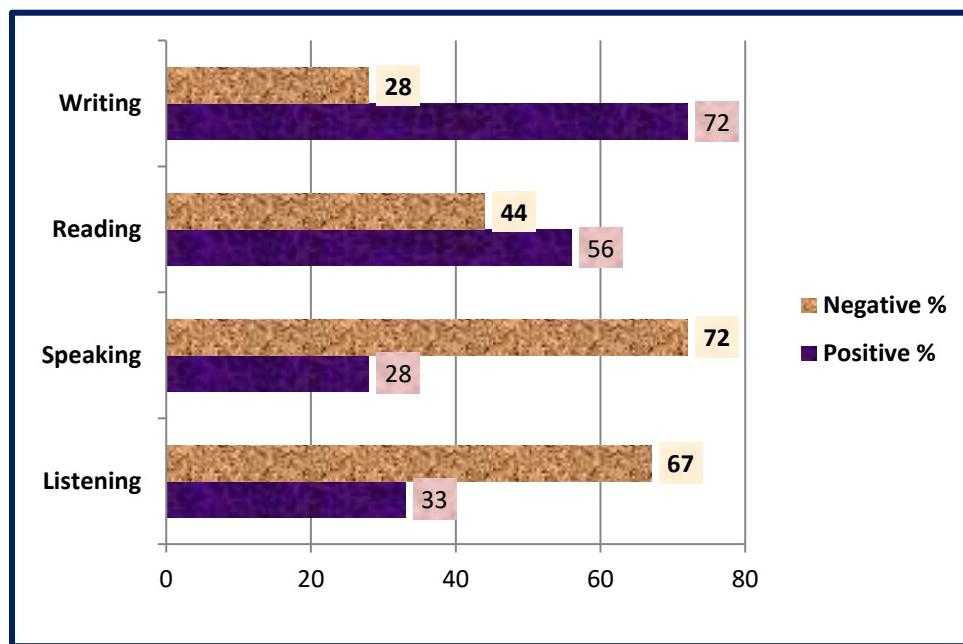


Figure 3. Teachers' views on syllabus emphasis of language skills.

Sixty-one percent of the teachers opined that the syllabus has no scope for developing practical skills or presentation skills; likewise, 61% of the teachers were of the opinion that the

syllabus does not provide absolute scope for developing the writing skills of the learners. Of the teacher sample, 83% stated that their students did not possess the required level of efficiency in written communication skills. Seventy-two percent of the teachers said that writing efficiency would demand the optimal level of efficiency in the other language skills. Most of the teachers (67%) considered lack of communication skills as a major problem of their students, and 61% considered inadequate vocabulary as another main problem of their students in learning English.

On the students' side, 47% said they face problems in communicating in English; 49% reported their poor communicative abilities, poor comprehensive abilities, and inadequate vocabulary level. Half (50%) claimed to face problems in speaking English, and 69% reported that inadequate grammatical knowledge was one of their problems. Finally, 86% of the students said they firmly believed that communication skills could be better taught demonstratively rather than theoretically.

Major Problems

Out of 618 respondents, 96% referenced difficulty with written academic communication (see Figure 4).

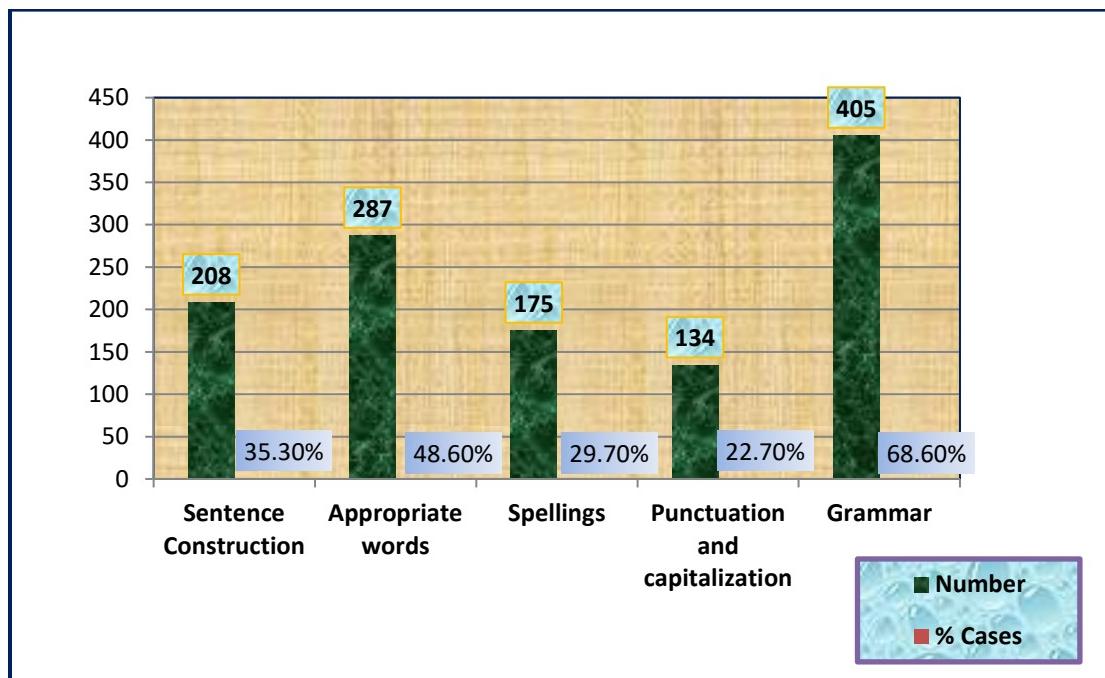


Figure 4. Difficult segments in written communication.

As Figure 4 displays, 69% of the total learners' responses revealed grammatical errors as the major difficulty. Another 49% confirmed students' difficulty in selecting appropriate words, yet another 35% of students mentioned trouble with sentence construction. Further, 30% of the responses substantiated difficulty in using correct spellings. Even adopting proper punctuation and capitalization seems to be a problematic issue for about 23% of respondents.

In conclusion, the syllabus does not provide any scope for the development of practical, soft presentation skills. The study confirms that the syllabus does not provide any scope for

developing writing skills of the learners; rather, it demands and evaluates memory skills and reproductive abilities. There is a vast gap between expected and achieved levels of efficiency. Most student respondents pointed to outdated teaching methods and irrelevant syllabi. There is consensus among the teachers about a need to include practical dimensions of evaluation in the forms of group discussions, oral exams, and personal interviews to improve their verbal communication. All the teachers opined that mere 3-hr written examination is not adequate to judge the overall development of the learner, especially on communication skills.

Teachers' Opinions on Writing Skills Enhancement

Writing skill efficiency automatically enhances the other language skills. Students' learning efficiency varies from learner to learner, and their acquired level of efficiency influences their current learning output. Evaluating learners' performance by assessing their writing skills in the concerned subject will not ensure their overall development, as this tests only their rote memory and reproductive abilities. It was confirmed by all the teachers that mere writing efficiency does not ensure complete linguistic proficiency. Proper writing efficiency demands an optimal level of knowledge and acquaintance with all other language skills. The segment report writing also demands some sort analytical skills from the learners.

Students' Revelations

Though the majority of the students did not consider English to be a tough subject, it was observed that many of them could not attain the minimum required level of writing proficiency in communicative English. This poor performance substantiates either their casual attitude or their poor academic performance. There was consensus among the teachers and learners that the communication skills can be better taught through demonstration. Many of the students did not have that confidence about their satisfactory proficiency level in their communicative abilities in English. Grammar seems to be a difficult task for majority of the students, and selection of appropriate words seems to be a second major problem. All the students expressed consensus regarding the four factors that are essential for developing writing skills in English. The majority of them opined that basic knowledge is essential for developing writing skills in English. The majority also confirmed that presentation skills, good command over the language, and familiarity with all language skills will enable them to enhance their written communication skills. All the four options were considered by the majority of respondents.

Communication Skills

Language and Communication skills are recognized as important elements in education of the modern generation. Personality development remains incomplete, if the communication skills are ignored. Effective communication demands proper knowledge of English grammar, accent, and pronunciation. Words should be handled with care so that the exact intended meaning is interpreted. To attain this language proficiency, command over the English language and good communication skills are necessary. Communicative competence refers to both knowledge and the skill in using this knowledge when interacting in actual communication. Effective communication is a must in this era of globalization. It is a combination of effective listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Effective communication enables one to establish and maintain both personal and professional relations successfully.

This study points out the certain lacunae in the current educational communication, which emphasizes theoretical acquisition of knowledge and fails to provide successful guidance for the development and expansion of human capabilities, as well as personal development.

Communication skills, which are one of the judging parameters, are not given due weight in the language curriculum.

The study confirms the fact that a person with a solid knowledge of communication skills will be able to substantiate his or her academic performance in a relatively better manner. These skills develop self-confidence, and they also increase the individuals' employment opportunities.

In spite of studying English for years together, we cannot achieve the expected level of efficiency in English language proficiency. It is unfair to teach these soft skills in a theoretical context and expect the learners to perform in a practical sense. Soft skills are given no weight in the university evaluation. When they are not prescribed in the syllabus, very few learners may think of acquiring the knowledge of these soft skills. A person without soft skills finds it difficult to face the challenges of the current-day scenario. In spite of securing good percentage of academics, they could not compete with those who are well acquainted with these soft skills. This gap between academic excellence and soft skills and personality development has to be addressed. It is a known fact that a common job requirement is to have good oral communication skills in addition to the technical knowledge. But the present language curriculum and evaluation system do not emphasize the aspects of communication skills. The currently prevailing rote learning does not help the students to enhance their analytical skills.

R. Rajaram, head of human resources for a major information technology (IT) company, pointed out that the majority of the present-day graduates fail to write correct and complete sentences in English. They do not have a thorough understanding of grammatical aspects or the significance of punctuation marks.

The Role of Communication Skills in Employability: Some Research Review Revelations

The *National Employability Report* by Aspiring Minds, an employability solutions company, revealed that inadequate English and computer skills are the key factors that make graduates unemployable. It stated that out of 60,000 Indian graduates, about 16% and 14% of the graduates were employable in sales and customer service operations. These jobs require communication, cognitive skills, and personality traits such as friendliness and agreeableness and in the latter numerical ability too. Over one third of the graduates (36%) were suitable for employment in clerical/secretarial jobs, which require relatively low skills. Only 2% of graduates are employable in corporate communication or content development, as the primary requirements are an exceptional command over English and basic analytical skills. Only 3% are employable as analysts and a mere 2% as accountants. In teaching, the employability was only 15%, as all jobs require high competence in cognitive skills and English. It was found that the higher the skill requirement for a job, the greater the gap in employability. The cognitive skills remain the same, but the maximum difference between them is English communication skills. So, we cannot deny the fact that "Poor English, Computer Skills Make Graduates Unemployable" (Nagarajan, 2013).

National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) data that appeared in *The Economic Times* article "Only 25% IT Graduates Readily Employable: NASSCOM" (ET Bureau, 2011) justifies why when big IT companies and organizations like NASSCOM say that only 25% of the technical graduates are employable, what they mean is that most of them have not been able to communicate their skills and thought processes effectively due to a gap between industry and academia (Singh, 2013).

A study conducted by Paulrajan (2011) concluded that a mix of academic qualifications, important vocational skills, and personal skills were selling points for entry-level jobs. Employers in the retail industry look for people for their managerial jobs with different skill sets, such as academic qualifications, communication skills, leadership skills, teamwork skills, and prior work experience.

Pandey (2012) identified the important factors affecting employability of master of business administration students, and the study concluded with the need for developing critical thinking skills among the youth. Shukla (2012) attempted to identify the level of employability skills among students. The study revealed that the university curriculum should be redesigned with more apprenticeship and live industry projects, which will facilitate prejob training and enhance the employability among graduates.

A study by Chithra (2013) revealed that the students with prior work experience have a better awareness of the employability skills than students with no work experience. The current need is to enhance the skills and application of knowledge through specific training that will enable the workers to perform their jobs in the best possible manner.

According to the *National Employability Report* (2016), more than 80% of the engineering graduates are unemployable (<http://www.aspiringminds.com/research>). Rao (2010), in his book *Soft Skills – Enhancing Employability: Connecting Campus With Corporate*, states that “Currently Indian Education System focuses on too much on facts and figures which does not support creativity, analytical and reasoning power among the children” (p. 129). The communicative skill therefore seems to be the most important component in deciding students’ career.

To quote Ahmed, former minister of state for human resources development and external affairs, “Of late, employability of graduates coming out of our educational system is becoming a matter of great concern. I am told only 25% of the general graduates across all streams have employable skills”.

According to the Government of India Planning Commission approach to the 12th 5-year plan, there is a need to focus on these skill aspects to generate employment opportunities to the graduating students. General education lays the foundation for a knowledge-based concept. It fails to equip the graduates with necessary work skills. They require skills beyond the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic (the “three Rs”). Skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (the “four Cs”) are now important in more and more jobs. Youth completing their education should not hunt for a job; the employers should come to the university and hire them (Tank, 2013). Raman and Sharma (2012) stated, “Communication Competence is the ability to express views in an effective manner, enabling one to achieve goals and enhance relationships”. According to Knell, Oakley, and O’Leary (2007), employers are continually asking for a workforce rich in creativity, communication skills, and cultural understanding.

The study revelations substantiate those of the Aspiring Minds *National Employability Report* that poor English and computer skills are the key factors for graduate unemployment. All the researchers emphasized the need to enhance communication skills for improving their employment opportunities. All the reviews substantiated that poor communication skills are the major cause of educated unemployment, minimizing the employment opportunities of present-day graduates.

Suggestions

The poor communication skills of the educated youth are a matter of serious concern, as they minimize the employment opportunities. Most employers expect five top skills: (a) time management, (b) ability to work under pressure, (c) accuracy and attention, (d) oral communication, and (e) multitasking. Further, a U.N. Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization publication added flexibility, innovativeness, creativity, entrepreneurship, versatility, and team work to the skills list. Of the millions of higher educated students in the developing world, very few receive such an education with these required skills and competencies; the rest are taught by poorly motivated, poorly qualified, and poorly compensated faculty using outdated curricula.

It is high time for the colleges to train their students in the world of work as well. Until or unless the students are given practical work, no amount of theoretical knowledge will help them to link up with the working world. The personality of the teacher in bringing about a better environment in the college is to be focused upon. The basic aims of teaching English at commerce colleges are to provide professional expertise and leadership quality to the students as per the order of the day. But in reality, there is a vast gap between the syllabus prescribed for the commerce students and the utility of that syllabus in their practical life. The following suggestions may be helpful to minimize the gap and ensure better language learning output.

There is a need to conduct bridge courses in the beginning of the term to level the gap between high- and low-proficiency learners. Further, it is also necessary to help the learner realize the need and significance of learning oral communication skills in English. The focus should be placed on practical dimensions of evaluation. Self-introduction, group discussion, presentations, and quizzes should be included as a part of examination and evaluation. Unlike other content subjects, language as a skill subject should be taught practically. It is more acquired than learned; the classroom should be learner oriented to enhance interactive abilities.

There is also a need to introduce English for specific purposes as a subject at the college level. English for specific purposes can prepare the learners to qualify themselves at the campus interviews, improve their job opportunities, and make them more employable overall.

A teacher of English is expected to prepare the learners who can make use of English as per the situational context. Their focus should be diverted to communicative language teaching. Pronunciation practice should be given importance in the process of English learning through literature, and grammar components should be taught functionally. The traditional mode of teaching should be updated, and the latest technology-enabled teaching aids should be used to motivate the learners. A properly equipped language lab should be installed in all the colleges, and short-term courses should be made compulsory for all the graduating students. All the teachers and the students should be oriented toward the digitalized language teaching/learning.

The language planners should focus on redesigning the existing curriculum of teaching English to get the student learners' greater scope for making an effort at learning English as their own. Skill development needs to be included in the curriculum.

Conclusion

The requirements of the job market focus on the need to develop skills and competencies, which include the enhancement of oral skills, life skills, problem-solving skills,

and soft skills. In short, today, we need a curriculum that develops the overall development of a learner's whole personality.

The entire language teaching/learning process must aim at sharpening the problem-solving capabilities of the learner. The system should be reformed so as to devote more of their resources for developing a pool of talented human capital having dynamic leadership ability. Though the first aim of education is to enlighten the human mind by way of providing knowledge, its ultimate goal is to ensure successful career placement. Hence, that education that develops all the aspects—such as the theoretical acquisition of knowledge and practical usage of the acquired skills and competencies—should be designed.

Strong English knowledge will definitely change our working attitude and improve our employment opportunities. University education should focus on developing the key competencies and skills that lead the younger generation to reach its goals. So, in the 21st century, communication skills have become an essential element of ensuring empowerment and employment. Employability skills enable the learner to withstand the increasing levels of competition at every phase of life. English, being the source of language proficiency, facilitates and enhances other required skills like soft skills, presentation skills, and, above all, communication skills. Finally, this article emphasizes the need to revise the syllabus, teaching strategies changing roles of the teachers and learners as per the needs of the changing society. As Kalam (2006) said, "Education system must create Employment generators, not Employment seekers".

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